8-29-2023

Tripping into the Light Fantastic: Seeing (through) MacDonald

Sarah Waters

Tripping into the Light Fantastic: Seeing (through) MacDonald[1]

Sarah Waters

It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that I am one of the only English literature lecturers in England's green and now rather secular land[2] teaching George MacDonald to final year students at a decidedly secular university.[3] I do not teach him didactically, nor would my students respond favorably if I did. Instead, we explore him critically, imaginatively, and with literary lenses, considering "The Light Princess" and "The Fantastic Imagination" especially, and, as we do so, stumbling (often to my own surprise) on moments which point towards the unexpected weightiness hidden in the "lightness" of the story. The course where they study MacDonald, "The Inklings and their Influences,"[5] encourages students to explore MacDonald as a significant early writer of and about "fantastic" imaginative fiction, and as an influence[6] on later writers, like Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien with whom they are more familiar.

Although C.S. Lewis's adage about the possibility of smuggling truths in through another imaginary space in order to "steal past those watchful dragons" ("Sometimes Fairy Stories" 47) is much cited, interestingly, my students' response to MacDonald suggest the merits of his rather more eucatastrophic "revealing" approach. This points perhaps to the limitations of "smuggling" and the possibilities of a more "open" approach regarding meaning, which directly invites readerly openness. Interestingly, MacDonald's invitation for readers to take *their meaning* from the text is something my students with no faith background respond to receptively – embracing and marveling at what they term the "modern" or "contemporary" feel of such a critical position. I was surprised that my students thought MacDonald to be a more "capacious" and "progressive" antithesis to his (now more well-known) fantasy writer successors.[4]

In our discussions this year, students drew attention, especially, to what they saw as the heavy-handedness of the faith underpinning Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, while acknowledging surprise at the contemporary feel of the Victorian MacDonald in his dialogical rather than monological approach. This especially struck them since it occurred in a genre in which didacticism is common, especially in postmodern politicized rewritings of fairy tales, where didacticism can be especially clunky. They suggested that MacDonald had a lighter (in this positive sense) touch than contemporary writers like Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber* and *Book of Fairy Stories*) and Emma Donoghue (*Kissing the Witch*). Of course, I was delighted to hear my young scholars thinking seriously about the prophetic elements of MacDonald's works of and on the imagination, although they would not put it quite that way, perhaps.

This essay draws on my own experience and the experiences and insights of my students reading MacDonald in his bicentenary year (2024), especially their sometimes emotionally-laden responses which indicate the creaking opening of the heart.[7] It sketches the way these students see MacDonald prophetically pointing towards later critical and theoretical trends, such as his remarkably democratic understanding of the imagination and the significance he gives to the role (and agency) of the reader ("The Fantastic Imagination" 7). Although they, perhaps, do not see MacDonald pointing beyond the story to the larger story, they certainly feel the impact of those weighty truths woven into his writing. Their perspectives help me to re-see and feel the Truth in his imaginative works.[8]

First Glimpses of MacDonald

I came to MacDonald the way I suppose many do, or at least many in Lewis circles do.[9] I read Lewis talking about *Phantastes* – a work whose "bright shadow" transformed and "in a certain sense, baptized" Lewis's imagination (*Surprised by Joy* 146) – and decided I ought to both

educate myself and find out what the fuss was about. I confess to not having understood

Phantastes and I did not finish it.[10] It was not, therefore, until some years later that I returned to

MacDonald when Joe Ricke organized a performance of "The Light Princess" first at Texmoot

(2021) and later that same year for Inkling Folk Fellowship (both via Zoom).[11] At the time of that

first performance we were in the midst of another national lockdown in the UK (January 2021-

July 2021), and I was tired, as the performance took place late at the end of a long day of

conferencing.[12] Knowing only the title, I thought it would be about a princess who glowed and

shone with light. I did not read the story or even read about the story ahead of time, I just sleepily

crammed into my parents back room up against boxes and listened in.[13] And I was struck. Struck

many times by the shift from light to deep emotional dark and back to light again. It made me

hurt. It also filled my pun loving heart with delight. MacDonald's playfulness with language

coupled with the King's ironic hatred of "all witticisms, and punning especially" ("The Light

Princess" 21), and particularly the metalinguistic reflection on "the double meaning of lightness"

(although really by that stage of the chapter we have been treated to a whole myriad of "light"

puns in quick succession), sets up the whimsy and indeed "lightness" (21) of the story. But this

lightness is multilayered, and the story also has the capacity to lighten or lift the heart and

(re)light the spirit as well, as indeed is the intention of the story for Adela Cathcart (48) for

whom the "The Light Princess" is told in the volume where the story first appeared in print

(*Adela Cathcart* 52-100).

 "The Light Princess" captured my heart and my imagination, and, as the story progressed,

I sat on the edge of my seat suddenly expecting another ending, an ending I was dreading. By

2.30 am when the performance was over, I was sad I had not encountered *that* MacDonald first.

So, when I came to design "The Inklings and their Influences," I knew I had to include

MacDonald, and, when it came to picking a MacDonald text, I was adamant I wanted my students to come to MacDonald through his fairy tales (and his writing about them) instead of through the more structurally jarring and immersive *Phantastes*.[14]

But if my coming to MacDonald via Lewis and *Phantastes* was at least close to typical, my students are thoroughly atypical. They do not come to MacDonald via Lewis or Tolkien or Owen Barfield or another "inkling" nor via writers like G.K. Chesterton (9-15) who would be rather obscure if not mostly unknown amongst my cohorts. Indeed, not only do they come to MacDonald by way of "The Light Princess" (and then "The Fantastic Imagination" and "Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture"), they also come at MacDonald's works from different worldviews to those perpetuated in most MacDonald scholarship.

I have yet to teach it to a student familiar at all with MacDonald prior to this course, and this is after they have had a whole course on Victorian Literature and another one on Children's Literature.[15] However, the texts studied on those courses do become frames of reference for these students and their discussions of "The Light Princess." This leads, for instance, to interesting parallels of "The Light Princess" with nonsense poetry, such as the work of Edward Lear and the much later writer Edward Gorey,[16] as well as with Lewis Caroll who is, of course, a more familiar touchstone in MacDonald scholarship (Gabelman 2022). Students also draw connections between MacDonald and contemporary Victorian writers like Charles Dickens, and, because of their fairy tale context, Brothers Grimm and the earlier Charles Perrault. This leads to readings from students who argue, for instance, that "the dialogical interaction between MacDonald and the imaginary speaker in 'The Fantastic Imagination' parallels the relationship between the Duchess and Alice in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. While Alice attempts to decode the events of Wonderland through scientific reason and logic, the Duchess provokes Alice by

applying bizarre and nonsensical morals to the events of the novel. Carroll thus satirizes excessive moralizing in children's literature through the Duchess, who taunts: 'everything's got a moral, if only you can find it' (Carroll 74)" (Student 1).

Unpacking the connections between MacDonald's "The Light Princess" and Victorian "nonsense" writing, students go on to argue that "MacDonald appropriates [Carroll's] idiom in 'The Fantastic Imagination'" (Student 1). But they note a distinction between the two writers' approaches: "while Carroll mocks excessive moralizing, MacDonald ridicules the imaginary speaker's relentless pursuit of stable meaning" (Student 1), concluding that "Carroll and MacDonald create a surplus of meaning in their texts to reject the dominance of logic and reason over creative and imaginative faculties" (Student 1). While MacDonald does use some "nonsense" techniques and, in the fairytale genre, defies "preexisting notions about reality" and their security to which, as U.C. Knoepflmacher puts it, we "often cling" (xviii), his rejection of fixed meaning is not anarchic. Rather, MacDonald's rejection of reason coincides with the function of nonsense literature. A literature which, according to Edward Strachey, "has proved not to be an equally prosaic and commonplace negative of Sense. . .but a bringing out a new and deeper harmony of life in and through its contradictions" (335). Moreover, this reading this student offers, prompts us to consider what deeper kinds of harmony the contradictions in "The Light Princess" bring out.

But beyond such contemporary Victorian connections, my students come to MacDonald, through ideas like Newton's "Laws of Universal Gravitation" (1687) and therefore they focus on the literal subversion with which MacDonald is engaging, as he plays with the shift in Victorian society from a reliance on religion to a reliance on science (see also Kreglinger 116-123). They also come through gendered rewritings of fairy stories (Carter and Donoghue, especially), and

perhaps even more unusually still, by way of post-structuralist theory (especially Roland

Barthes). These are not what we might think of as natural lenses through which to read

MacDonald perhaps, and we might worry that they may mar the message. However, I think these

perspectives actually enhance our readings of MacDonald, MacDonald scholarship, and point

towards other points of contact inherent but as yet untapped in MacDonald's work. This includes

literary markers which might point to the very Message the students are perhaps least looking for

in their literary studies, which might nonetheless impress itself upon them and demand to "be

beheld" (*A Dish of Orts* 205).

Also, to students who might resist more straightforward allegorical or overly moralistic

approaches, or the kind of hoodwinking Philip Pullman charges Lewis with, MacDonald offers a

kind of potential alternative that does not, as it happens, get their guard up quite so much.[17] Less

sneaking past watchful dragons, more inviting the reader to be receptive to the text and to make

meaning from it. Some of those meanings might point them in directions they had not first

thought of, might perhaps become a kind of means towards a deeper connection whether through

an emotional baptism shrouded in tears, marveling at MacDonald's eucatastrophes, or simply a

shock at a more democratic response to the meaning of the text, particularly in a genre where

meanings and meaning making can often feel strictly controlled or morally dogmatic (Zipes

2002, 18).

As we continue, we will see MacDonald's words on the imagination and writing

fantastical works echoing through in the responses of my students to "The Light Princess,"

particularly his assessment that "the best thing [an author] can do for your fellow, next to rousing

his conscience, is – not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him;

or say, to make him think things for himself" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 7). Throughout the

essay, I include comments from my students to give a flavor of their responses. These comments were sometimes included in their essays and other times verbalized as part of tutorial or seminar discussions.[18]

Meaning Making

Upon reading "The Fantastic Imagination," my students noted, with surprise, that MacDonald "had fairly radical views about the meaning of a fairy tale" (Student 2). What they mean by this is not that he was radical in terms of, say, his religious positioning (such as his contested universalism)[19] or mysticism,[20] or even that his fairy tales are subversive. Instead, what they have in mind is what they see to be his "radical" approach to reader involvement and agency. This assessment is primarily a result of their readings and response to "The Fantastic Imagination" and particularly the dialogue concerning fairy tales and what they might "mean":

> Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his
>
> own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another
>
> will read another. . . It may be better that you should read your meaning
>
> into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere
>
> reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine (7).

Developing further this discussion of the agency MacDonald affords his readers in his fiction and his writing about fiction, my students drew points of connection with post-structuralists, seeing MacDonald as something of a precursor. They suggested that MacDonald seems to them to have "cemented the theory" (Student 2) articulated by Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (1967). They noted that in Barthes's and MacDonald's theorizing of the relationship between the writer, the text, and the reader, they both point towards the idea that the (metaphorical) death of the author is "the birth of the reader" (Barthes 148),[21] allowing "the opportunity for any reader to

interpret a text however they wish" (Student 2). However, they do note a key distinguisher between Barthes and MacDonald which is MacDonald's emphasis on "having a childlike imagination" (Student 2). Although my students understood that this is contextually connected to MacDonald's resistance to religious and specifically Victorian concerns about the negative possibilities of the imagination, it nonetheless smacked of postmodern theory, for them, as well. The relative openness of interpretative possibilities MacDonald's discussion of meaning making in "The Fantastic Imagination" allowed for, came as a surprise to them. Indeed, they were shocked at the freedom, or apparent freedom, MacDonald's writings on the imagination (specifically "The Fantastic Imagination") and his own fiction (particularly "The Light Princess") give the reader to make their own meaning.

Clearly their reference to Barthes's "The Death of the Author" is anachronistic. But the students were well aware of the anachronism even as they made it, and even as they sought to frame MacDonald as a kind of proto-post structuralist. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes argues that writing is a performative act which only exists at the moment we read the words on the page, because that is the only moment in which those words are actually given meaning – and they are given their meaning by readers, who interpret them (145-46). Barthes maintains that imposing an "Author" on a text actually limits the text, because we have to view the literary work in relation to the author who wrote it – its meaning must be traced back to the historical person who produced it. For Barthes, literature instead is a "tissue of signs" (147) which only have meaning when the reader engages with them. Especially interesting, when reading MacDonald in the light of Barthes, is Barthes's argument that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the AuthorGod)" (146). This is a facet of Barthes's argument that, as we will see below, some students also engaged with in their

analysis. Indeed, MacDonald, for my students, for all of the "theological" meaning of his works, also challenges the idea of a singular meaning prescribed by an author/authority who functions as an omniscient God-like figure. Even as MacDonald acknowledges God as "maker," he also draws a clear distinction between *the* Author and human authors: "One difference between God's work and man's is, that, while God's work cannot mean more than he meant, man's must mean more than he meant" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 9).

For Barthes, the meaning of a text lies "not in its origin but in its destination" (148). He suggests that authors and their predetermined meanings are not the only meaning-makers; indeed, he argues that to read for authorial intent as the only cipher "is to impose a limit on that text" (147). The reader also brings meaning to the text. MacDonald points towards this idea when he argues that a writer's words, "if they can be so used as to convey definite meaning, it does not follow that they ought never to carry anything else" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 8). They may, therefore, function as a "tissue of quotations" (Barthes 146), pointing readers in a myriad of directions. However, MacDonald does pull back a little from the suggestion that the author's words may be made to mean anything, even if he agrees that they may mean more than the author themselves can first see.

If Barthes's destruction of the author (and their echoing authority) creates a dialogic space between readers and text, MacDonald likewise encourages a dialogic and democratic reader response space, but still allows the author to be one of the voices in the mix. Moreover, the "theological" Barthes refers to, points towards another clear distinguisher: MacDonald diverges from Barthes not least in his argument that an author's story can mean more than the author intends because another (capitalized) Author and the created things with which the author creates are also involved. Nonetheless, both in their theorizing about what making meaning looks

like in the interplay of authors and readers, and in the agency they offer to readers, Barthes and MacDonald disrupt the hierarchical Author-as-authority structure. Perhaps then it grows clearer why my students suggest MacDonald can be seen as engaging with at least similar ideas to those popularized almost 100 years later by Barthes and other post-structuralist theorists.

One student further developed the emphasis Barthes and MacDonald place on multiplicity of meaning by turning to reflect on MacDonald's use of wordplay and puns in "The Light Princess." They suggested that MacDonald's puns in "The Light Princess" were precursors or early-symptoms of the linguistic anxiety concern of post-structuralism, and proposed that MacDonald's self-conscious play with this "form [of] duplicity" ("The Light Princess" 22) revealed something of Barthes's suggestion that a text is "a multi-dimensional space" (146). They suggested that "The Light Princess" emphasizes this through MacDonald's "playing with double meanings" (Student 3) not least in the "lightness" of the princess and her story. The activeness demanded of a reader of MacDonald's works was also indicated in another student's argument that MacDonald's discussion of the reader's involvement in meaning making in a story emphasizes the "importance not just of giving readers the meanings that stories have, but urging them to think and imagine them by themselves" (Student 4).

Connectedly, and perhaps more surprising still, when discussing "The Light Princess" in its fairy-tale context, several students found MacDonald to be far *less* prescriptive than they anticipated, even about the moral of the story.[22] They saw this to be a kind of case in point or an extension of his emphasis, in "The Fantastic Imagination" (and realized in his fiction) on the reader locating the meaning they find there, rather than swallowing whole a meaning forced upon them (7). This is not to say that they were unaware of the Christian symbolism employed in the story, or allegorical readings of "The Light Princess,"[23] but they were likewise conscious of

MacDonald's refutation that his fairytales are allegories – "there may be allegory in it but it is not an allegory" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 7-8). Particularly relevant to this discussion is MacDonald's objection to the overuse of "allegory" as a label, as though that genre were the only grounds by which any story might have "two meanings" (Greville MacDonald 297),[24] since this again shows his interest in multiplicity of meanings. Continuing in this moral vein, my students felt that "while the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault reinforced a universal moral within their stories aimed at children, MacDonald seemed in fact to do the opposite" (Student 2).[25] MacDonald, for them, does not argue for a universal moral in his fairy tales, or prescribe only one moral, but rather offers a variety of morals for the taking; inviting a kind of moral making or moral conclusion drawing on the part of the reader.

Tying these ideas to MacDonald's theorizing about the imagination specifically, students explored the idea that in "The Fantastic Imagination" MacDonald "challenges the Victorian practice of privileging reason over the imagination by disrupting the imaginary speaker's pursuit of fixed meaning. In 'The Light Princess' we see MacDonald's rejection of didacticism in literature fitting with the way, in his works on the imagination, MacDonald emphasizes that he is against prescribing fixed meaning in his fiction, and avoids writing allegorical texts" (Student 1). They also noted that "while post-structuralism would suggest that the lack of fixed meaning in 'The Light Princess' creates tension" (Student 1), MacDonald is interested instead in a multiplicity of meaning and "embraces the idea of the decentered individual" (Student 1) – decentering the princess not only from normalized princesses behavior, but also from normal human gravity.

That lack of "fixed" meaning, that decentering, takes on a very literal sense as well as a linguistic one in "The Light Princess," as MacDonald invites his readers to revel in the multiple

meanings of the lightness of gravity and of what it means to be pulled back down to a fixed position, and the way this can limit as well as release new possibilities (for instance, the princess ultimately gains freedom from her lightness but this is not without a sense of loss). The princess does not match her "human" signifier of being attached to the ground; in an inverted world a multiplicity of meanings coexist.

To construct the princess's identity, it is not straightforward enough to define her as anti-human or fantastical and have done with it. Her identity is constructed on more than mere binaries. Instead, it is constructed by multilayered signifying signs which decenter our notion of meaning – of lightness, of princesses, of gendered trajectories of story lines, of regaining "normal" human qualities as necessarily a positive thing (see Anderson's "The Little Mermaid"), and of the author as the authority, with the power to choose one meaning and package it to us). MacDonald's "The Light Princess" instead embraces a series of intermingled meanings.

In the light of this discussion, students concluded that:

> MacDonald expresses a post-structuralist aversion to grand narratives in "The Fantastic Imagination." By refusing fixed meaning and absolute truth, MacDonald challenges the assumption that the reader is a passive recipient of stable meaning, as defined and imposed by the author. Rather, MacDonald emphasizes that meaning is contingent with the subjective interpretation of the reader, who "will read [the fairy tale's] meaning after his own nature and development" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 7). Barthes echoes MacDonald's sentiment that power resides with the reader, as opposed to the author. Barthes and MacDonald

correspondingly oppose the notion that reading is a matter of decoding a

"'secret'. . . ultimate meaning, to the text" (Barthes 147). (Student 3)

Developing this still further, they suggested that "a post-structuralist concern with linguistic

anxiety" and "an aversion to grand narratives" are evidenced in "The Light Princess" (Student

1). Noting, for instance, that symbols and sites are multilayered, such as the lake which, one

student suggested, becomes "a site of social and patriarchal rebellion, as well as, later, a site of

religious and moral conformity" (Student 1). They argued that the lake is "a locus of unstable

meaning. MacDonald allows conflicting meanings to exist simultaneously to challenge the

Victorian cultural practice of championing reason over the imagination" (Student 1). These

disruptions, already evident in "The Fantastic Imagination" and "The Light Princess," grow even

clearer when explored in the light of post-structural theory and the way that, for my students,

MacDonald offers a more open attitude towards the reader and the reader's interpretations.

Gender and (Dis)ability

My students were also interested in "The Light Princess" in the light of disability studies and the

degree to which there is a compromise inherent in the restoring of the princess. They discussed

whether there is, in fact, intrinsic value in her pre-"healed" state of "difference" before she is

"healed" into conformity or forced into the mold of normalcy. And, if there is, whether this is

negated as a result of the removal of her "lightness." They discussed also the way MacDonald

shows her pre-change goodness (albeit imbalanced) by way of contrast in the face of the

harshness she is subjected to by her father. One student noted, for instance, "in a dark attempt to

remedy the Princess's ailment, the King at one moment resorts to 'whipping' her ("The Light

Princess" 31), in an attempt to beat sense into her and make her feel something heavier than her

unnatural lightness" (Student 5). The King continues with the "awful whipping" (31) hoping to

elicit a tear, but none flow; instead, gradually, as the beating continues, her "laughing" begins to sound "uncommonly like screaming" (31).

These discussions took place before any exposure to the works of critics who have considered this in more detail, such as Danielle Price and Jacqueline Harris. Harris notes that the princess is characterized as being opposed to "socially approved laws of nature" (21), and Price likewise comments on the ways the "princess functions as a disabled character," but also argues that "unlike many fairy tales where disabled heroines lose their agency, the light princess retains hers. She enhances this agency by finding her own curative space [the lake] and keeping it" (1). However, my students wondered whether in fact the princess is restricted by the end of the story, as she is forced back into the mode of "conventional" models of femininity, with her dependency magnified still further by her reliance on others to walk ("The Light Princess" 32). Previously, by contrast, she was characterized by her whole-bodied embrace of difference (even if this was the result of a curse). My students problematized the idea that the princess's curse is wholly a negative to be recovered from and the idea that her "recovered" self is automatically "better." Furthermore, they emphasized the fact that since MacDonald had shown the beauty and wonder of her self which is revealed through her difference to others (as she is "othered"), the conclusion perhaps compromises this.

Is she "better" in her body at the end physically? MacDonald does not necessarily suggest she is and indicates the pain in that transformation such as the "pain of learning" ("The Light Princess" 32) to walk (a pain, of course, to a degree offset by the prince as teacher and the lake as a continual swimming solace to "tumble" (32) into). In one sense she is "bettered," as she becomes aware of the needs of those besides herself, healed from her self-centeredness and

lightness. She is also powerfully affected by the cause of her transformation, as she recognizes

the gravity of the prince's sacrifice ("The Light Princess" 50-51).

Other kinds of othering in the text were also central concerns in our discussions of "The

Light Princess." Questions and conversations also emerged surrounding gender and gender

(re)presentation in "The Light Princess." According to Harris, "to child readers, the story

becomes one wherein a patient prince falls for this noncompliant female and successfully tricks

her into a fairy tale romance happy ending" (21). But does it? My students resisted this reading,

noting that the princess refuses to be tricked, she remains in charge, and the prince is also

literally lower, which my students saw to be part of the subversive depiction of gender in "The

Light Princess."

As we discussed this text, my students wondered whether the princess's body is "tamed"

or simply rendered "normal" in the patriarchal schema of the society she inhabits? They

ultimately concluded that she is healed from her selfishness by the prince's self-sacrifice, but that

this is no trickery or hoodwinking; instead, the princess is brought to a stark point of realization

and revelation in herself, resulting in her coming out of herself. Moreover, in the light of the

potential gendered implications of these "growth" or development discussions, we noted that a

further issue with the idea of the prince somehow tricking the princess is that prince does not get

what he wants – which is a princess with whom he could find no "fault," and a compliant lady

"worthy of him" (31) – and he also grows in that. They both die to self in that sense.

Reading "The Light Princess" in the light of works like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The

Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), rather than more common reference frames found in MacDonald

studies like *Lilith* or *Phantastes*, my students were keen to point out that in "The Light Princess"

MacDonald gives more agency to a female protagonist than they expected, and causes the prince

to reconsider rumors and labels he has previously heard attached to the princess, such as reports

of her madness, bewitchment, or strangeness ("The Light Princess" 33). This, for my students,

was suggestive of the kind of agency Gilman invests in her oft labelled and pathologized

protagonist. They also noted that the princess's agency is especially evident when she is

compared with other versions of the sleeping beauty story, or "Type 410" as it is classified in the

Aarne-Thompson index ("AT 410" 137-38).[26] One student argued that "MacDonald comments

specifically on the lack of agency afforded to other Type 410 heroines, and calls for a more lax

social position on young women acting upon their erotic desires" (Student 6). This, they noted, is

in contrast to Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" which encourages women *not* to act

on such desires (61).[27] In fact, one student suggested that MacDonald's princess could "easily be

historicized as a fictional precursor to the 'New Woman' Phenomenon which gained traction at

the turn of the twentieth century" (Student 6).[28] Such readings situate what MacDonald is doing

in "The Light Princess" within the gender context of writers of his period, indicate the way he

responds to other contemporary fairy tales, and locate "The Light Princess" in its contemporary

socio-political context. In this way, my students are directly responding to the gauntlet

Christopher MacLachlan, John Pattrick Pazdziora and Ginger Stelle implicitly laid down when

they claimed that MacDonald's "place in his own time remains virtually untouched" (v). By

contrast, my students situate "The Light Princess" in its "own time" (v) in terms of period and

genre.

Indeed, the emphasis my students place on the socio-political and literary contexts in

their analyses of "The Light Princess" show the way MacDonald includes and pushes back at

limits placed (for gendered reasons) on the "sleeping" passive princesses of Type 410. He does

this in part by making the prince the one who becomes static in his deathly "past breathing" (50)

state, in contrast to a princess who is only "apparently asleep" (48) (unlike her fictional predecessor in Perrault, who really is asleep but is only apparently dead). Moreover, the echoes of the static deathly Sleeping Beauty (Perrault 330-31)[29] as a princess who must be raised to life by the prince of her tale, also foreshadows the end of "The Light Princess" – except that MacDonald subverts this foreshadowed end: it is the princess who must raise the prince to life, even as his death raises her to a new graver kind of life. Furthermore, while MacDonald's princess *appears* to be asleep, her rescuer works to secure the lake, later refusing her sleep, no matter how "sleepy" she is ("The Light Princess" 49). And of course, earlier in the narrative, the princess's curse causes her not the "absolute immobility" of her Sleeping Beauty predecessors, instead, as Price notes, she "has a frightening amount of impossible-to-control mobility" (1).

But we see MacDonald also challenging other gendered aspects of the Type 410 narrative in "The Light Princess." For instance, he talks overtly about gender, forced marriage and the freedom getting "lost in a forest" might allow princesses as well as princes ("The Light Princess" 32), and he plays with the gendering of wooing too (38). Ultimately, in their discussions my students show that there is more nuance to MacDonald's approach than Jack Zipes's reductive suggestion that "The Light Princess" "reflects MacDonald's disrespectful attitude toward traditional folktales and fairy tales" (*Fairy Tales* 113).

When I mentioned that my students come to "The Light Princess" by way of the works of Donoghue and Carter, especially the latter's loose version of Sleeping Beauty entitled "The Lady of the House of Love" (*The Bloody Chamber* 107-25), it might also be helpful to know that in Donoghue's own version of Sleeping Beauty – "The Tale of the Needle" (*Kissing the Witch* 155-70) – the princess also "didn't learn to walk" (160).[30] This is an interesting point of connection which prompts the question: was Donoghue subconsciously drawing on "The Light Princess" in

any way? This question is particularly pertinent given the points of contact between Donoghue's reinterpretation of gender and power dynamics in "The Tale of the Needle" and MacDonald's own self-reflexive unpacking of gender and agency in "The Light Princess." One point of contact is, of course, Roderick McGillis's argument that MacDonald "envisages a world of fairy that we can suitably term 'queer'" (86), as well as Osama Jarrar's work on the extent to which MacDonald's fairy tales are a "social critique of Victorian norms of sexuality and sex roles" (33).[31] Carter and Donoghue likewise explore the way "conventional" fairy tales (particularly in regard to their morals and gender restrictions),[32] "can be read not so much as a mirror image of the real than as discursive constructions that shape the social categories of 'boy' and 'girl'" (Marshall 256). Although certainly some fairytales uphold restrictions in society, as Maria Holgrem Troy notes, there are "also examples of fairy tales being seen as liberating narratives" (62), offering social critiques of those societies and their treatment of women and other marginalized figures.[33]

In the case of the other "versions" of fairytales students have hitherto encountered, namely Carter and Donoghue, these authors note directly their intended pointed or playful but certainly political purpose. Carter argued for instance that, in *The Bloody Chamber*, her aim was not to write "adult" fairy tales, but rather to "extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginning of new stories" (qtd. in Simpson ix). These are the same kind of gendered biases for instance that students see (to their surprise) MacDonald calling out when he deliberately subverts "traditional" fairy tale gender positions in his narrator's reflection that: "forests are very useful in delivering princes from their courtiers, like a sieve that keeps back the bran. Then the princes get away to follow their fortunes. In this way they have the advantage of the princesses, who are forced to marry before they have had a bit of fun. I wish our princesses

got lost in a forest sometimes" (32). Or his play with "falling in love" such that the princess

retains the upper-hand by her refusal to follow her fairy-tale path of falling in love with the

prince who "saves" her from the lake on their first meeting. Instead, the prince himself comes to

occupy the dependent role: "when the prince, who had really fallen in love when he fell in the

lake, began to talk to her about love, she always turned her head towards him and laughed" (38).

In that sense then, MacDonald hints at his own desire that we might have more stories in the

princesses lost in the forest vein, and new narratives which might emerge from these less

discussed ideas buried in the "traditional stories" (Carter qtd. in Simpson ix).

Carter and Donoghue's works explore different kinds of "deviance" as characters

demonstrate their "disruptive potential" which is "not in line with the hetero-patriarchal

dominant script" of "patriarchally structured female identity" (Wieckowska x). Moreover, as

Cristina Bacchilega suggests, rewriting fairytales is a "two-fold" process which seeks "to expose,

make visible, the fairy-tale's complicity with 'exhausted' narrative and gender ideologies" as

well as "expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or

left unexploited" (50). Pazdziora argues that MacDonald also "re-appropriated" fairytales "to his

own ends" (256). He characterizes MacDonald as one who "manipulate[s]" the existing tales and

their connected folklore in order to "arrange the traditional materials in ways that pleased him"

(256). My students likewise responded to "MacDonald's playful resistance of expectations and

pushing boundaries of fairy-tale 'norms'" (Student 3), commenting too on the disruption of the

omniscient third person narrator. They noted that the fragmentation is first instigated by a

forgetful narrator who has "quite forgotten" ("The Light Princess" 15) when the story took place,

and is then extended by giving characters voices which are not always filtered through the

narrator. Thus, one student argued that "this individualization – where characters have their own

distinct voices – effectively enables readers to reach their own conclusions about the characters, rather than having an enforced perception thrust upon them" (Student 3). This led them to conclude that this play with genre expectations and narrative perspective is, perhaps, a deliberate move by MacDonald to show that a multiplicity of meanings might be found in his work, and that the role the reader plays in actively seeking out and piecing together the story, affects the meanings they glean. This is then another fictional example of the agency of the reader MacDonald discusses in "The Fantastic Imagination" and his intention to, through the subversion of gender archetypes, "challenge reader expectations and fulfil his intent of instigating different interpretations" (Student 3).

Whether or not MacDonald exposes or upholds patriarchal narratives in "The Light Princess" was, however, hotly debated amongst my students. Certainly, they were in agreement that MacDonald playfully explores the "exhausted narrative" tropes of gendered positions and gendered language (Bacchilega 50). They also saw MacDonald exploring patriarchal policies through his lampooning of gendered inheritance through the phrase "light-haired" ("The Light Princess" 21) and its punning aural echo. They were keen to point out that MacDonald is also interested in unpacking the inherent "gender ideologies" in fairy tales through the way he exposes gendered double standards and the agency afforded to princes compared to princesses (such as who is allowed to get lost in forests) ("The Light Princess" 32). They noted the moments when MacDonald upholds gendered expectations – such as the villainous cursing serpent-wielding witch, the princess's aunt (40-42) – as well as when he directly challenges these gendered biases which frame girls as vulnerable and submissive or "modest and maidenly" (38) princesses, and princes as undefeatable active saviors. The savior in "The Light Princess" is indeed still male, but MacDonald's prince is vulnerable, and his human mortality is clearly

emphasized, while the unhuman qualities of the determined and defiant princess also show

MacDonald playing with the gendered restrictions traditionally placed on princesses in this form.

Far from sleeping or inhabiting a living grave and needing to be roused (as found in other

versions of Type 410), she is active and, if anything, her recovery is one which pushes her to a

more dependent and certainly more grounded existence.

Both Carter and Donoghue are interested in the reclamation of voice and agency, and in

different kinds of revoicing in fairy tales. MacDonald rewrites Type 410 in a way that connects

with these twentieth century rewritings, but is also distinct. As my students note, he is interested

in ideas of deviance and in challenging gendered language and easy moralistic conclusions, and

yet in ironizing easy morals as well. Moreover, this kind of deviance, previously seen by my

students in the fairy tales of Carter and Donoghue (which they therefore use as a reference point

for their discussions of "The Light Princess"), offers an alternative and valuable perspective as

they draw these different retellings into dialogue with one another. Thus, in their analyses my

students suggested ways that MacDonald's ideas about story writing and his fairy tales

themselves can be drawn on usefully and brought into dialogue with ongoing discussions about

gendered language and roles and the ever present "what is the moral?" (*Adela Cathcart* 98)

demand as these questions of gender (re)presentation are unpacked.

Further points of contact between these different kinds of retellings emerged in our

discussions as students considered, for instance, Carter's recoiling at the Hans Christen

Anderson's conclusion of "The Little Mermaid." In spite of the Little Mermaid's sacrifice, Carter

notes, "she did not win the love of the prince. (A touch of Calvinism there; Protestantism is a

hard taskmaster)" ("The Better to Eat You With" 451).[34] In response, students drew parallels with

the more freeing conclusion of "The Light Princes" for both the prince and the princess, which

they connected with MacDonald contextually and his own rejection of "hard Calvinism" (de Jong 19). Another suggested connection they noted was Carter's interest in moments of "epiphany" and what she termed "fragments of epiphanic experience,"[35] with the flashes of realization and revelation as well as kinds of resurrection and re-enlivening that we see in "The Light Princess," as they considered the extent to which those moments in "The Light Princess" are fragmentated or part of a unifying whole.

Eucatastrophe, Hope(lessness) and Shock(s)

In the cohort for "The Inklings and their Influences" this year (2024), my students all came from secular backgrounds. They were, therefore, familiar with ideas of sacrifice in the Christian tradition through literary references[36] rather than through direct religious instruction such as sermons or Sunday school. Critically though, this year the prince's death and sacrifice in "The Light Princess" especially moved and shocked my students, and they responded in deep, emotional, and sometimes unexpected ways.[37]

In their discussions of "The Light Princess" and its inclusion of death, particularly the visceral and painful depiction of the slow death of the prince and his self-sacrificial act – as "gush after gush" (49), the waters slowly rise up – they noted "MacDonald's potentially morbid and outright statement" (Student 2) that the Princess "did not care who the man was" ("The Light Princess" 47) who had offered to die for her "suggests a jarring element for the reader to stumble across" (Student 2). The princess's selfish and apparently glib response to the projected-death of another is only the first of such "jarrings" the students marked, as the story drew to a conclusion. Another student argued that, at the end of "The Light Princess," "ultimate morals are in some senses shattered, and even the ending can only be described as 'happy' in quotation marks" (Student 2). Furthermore, students expressed their shock at the prince's death which they did not

see coming, particularly because it seemed like it did not fit within the "happy ending" construction of a fairytale for which they felt trained. Because of the "happy ending" expectation, they were therefore surprised at the trajectory towards tragedy which snuck up in lightness and crashed in, hurting and affecting. This perhaps echoes the way "The Light Princess" story healingly affects Adela in the *Adela Cathcart* frame.

In *Adela Cathcart*, the melancholic tone and feelings of helplessness are central to the atmosphere of the overarching framing narrative, and are especially epitomized in the individual for whom the stories are offered, Adela, whose being "tired inside" (14) is symptomatic of her melancholic spilling over on the outside, even as she, with pain, still tries to smile. Her Uncle describes her as having an expression which "was very sad to look at" not because she necessarily appeared sad, but because of the "utter and careless hopelessness that [her face] expressed" (12). When "The Light Princess" is read with this in mind, the poignant and melancholic tone of some of the distress the princess and her parents experience, as well as the sadness (for the prince) amidst the hope (for the princess), particularly come to the fore and feel less at odds with the apparent "lightness" of the tale. However, this "happy ending" is somewhat predicated on the hope of life beyond death and resurrection as well. Hope replacing "utter . . . hopelessness" (*Adela Cathcart* 12). Nevertheless, even if readers approach "The Light Princess" outside of the *Adela Cathcart* frame, and see it from a worldview which does not consider resurrection possible outside of a miraculous or magical fairy-tale, the story can still prove powerfully affective. As my students' responses show, being open to the story (as MacDonald encourages his readers to be in "The Fantastic Imagination") means also to be open to its emotional punch. With such openness, this affect-filled response can also occur whether or not one shares the worldview of MacDonald. The shock of the prince's sacrifice, and his ultimate

death, as we witness the "bubbles of his last breath" (50), so apparently incongruous in a "light" princess story, may also lead to tears. Certainly they do for the princess (51). To continue the paradoxical schema MacDonald's multi-layered meaning and playfulness with "lightness" establishes, my students were shocked by what they did not know, and could not quite articulate what they were shocked by.

My students and their emotional responses to the text – a response which, in fact echoes mine when I first heard "The Light Princess"[38] – shows the affecting power of this story 150 years on. Affecting not just the princess and the prince within the story, or Adela within the other framing story, but readers outside of the stories. My students were surprised to have their hearts rattled, to cry, to feel deep sorrow and sadness at the death of the prince, to feel that all is lost, and were especially shocked to feel this way so unexpectedly in the fairy tale context. Interestingly, also, the students remarked that they were less affected when faced with the death of Aslan in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (136-41; 146-47) later in the term, even if "The Light Princess" and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are, in many ways, parallel stories of sacrifices and surprising resurrections. This was, in part, because even those previously unfamiliar with Lewis's story, suggested that Aslan's death and recovery seemed somehow more expected than the death of the prince in "The Light Princess."

My students are used to violence and death and destruction and used to this even in the context of fairy tales which play with conventions such as "happy endings," as seen for instance in the retellings of Carter and Donoghue, but they admitted that they were not used to the kind of emotional gut punch loaded in to the point where it appears all hope is lost in "The Light Princess." In the story ultimately "light" becomes "heavy," and the narrative seems to point to hopelessness, even as it somehow reorients again to a kind of hope readers had previously been

trained to believe was crushed. In "The Imagination its Function and Culture," MacDonald

suggests that God, in his creation of men, like characters in Shakespeare's plays "utters them into

the visible" (4). As actors show us realities and the drama of life, so does "The Light Princess"

also "image" more than the lightness which first meets the unsuspecting eye, and has the power

to, though this "imaging" ("The Imagination Its Function and Its Culture" 2) affect readers

deeply, as my students testify, and as they are led, through the story, to consider what it means to

"work out their life" (4) and what it means to be their "part" and to encounter one whose part is a

chosen sacrifice. Would MacDonald give us an affective shock? He gives us "The Light

Princess" and its sacrificial prince.[39] MacDonald, as we have seen, points readers towards

another more potent sacrifice even if they are not looking for it, and even if they restrict such

readings in their analysis to unpacking the Eucharistic imagery ("The Light Princess" 49), for

instance, nonetheless, their felt response indicates the felt weight of the story as well.

The week after their studies with "The Light Princess" my students read Tolkien's "On

Fairy-Stories" alongside MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination," and so then they begin to

use terms like "eucatastrophe" (153) to describe the emotional gravity they experience at the

climax of "The Light Princess." Interestingly, just before Tolkien introduces his new term

"eucatastrophe" in "On Fairy-Stories," he cites MacDonald:

> And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape
>
> from Death. Fairy-stories provide many examples and modes of this. . .Death
>
> is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald. . .Far more important is
>
> the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that
>
> all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the
>
> true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-

story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—

I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-

tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the

happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous

"turn" . . . it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to

recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure:

the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the

face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is

evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the

world, poignant as grief. (153)

Tolkien's framing of "tragedy" in opposition to the "fairy-story" in part points towards why my

students were shocked by the *almost* ending of "The Light Princess." In fairy-stories, trained as

they are for "consolation" not death (even if Tolkien argues this is a key "theme" in MacDonald's

works), and for a "happy ending" not tragedy, the gradual drowning of the prince (47-51) is a

shock. This is despite that fact that they are well-versed in revisionist fairy tales such as Carter

and Donoghue write, where tragedy commonly replaces the happy ending. Even if the return of

the lake is in one sense a happy ending for the princess, nonetheless any happiness is

compromised by the tragic trajectory of the prince on which it is predicated. Indeed, as one

student enquired in shocked response: "how many fairy tales are there where someone actually

dies for another and show their valiance and might that way?" (Student 6).

Although Tolkien suggests that fairy tales are the opposite of tragedy, my students

resisted readings quite as binary as this. They argued instead that, as MacDonald shows in "The

Light Princess," you have to push people almost to the point of total tragedy and disaster in order

to then pull them out into a "true" happy ending. A happy ending, that is, where the one thought lost (prince literally, princess gravitationally) is restored. This is a double "restoration" – the prince's sacrifice bodily restores the princess with emotion and physical gravity. But before this we see the "dyscatastrophe" (Tolkien 153) embodied before our eyes and the joy of miraculous deliverance which then follows in the dying and re-enlivening body of the prince – "just as the sun rose" (MacDonald 51).

This ending of "The Light Princess" is far weightier than the fairy tales it satirizes in its inclusion but undercutting of a traditional fairy tale ending "of course the prince and princess were betrothed at once" (52). It is weighter, in part, because, like Tolkien's "eucatastrophe," the conclusion means more, affects more deeply, for the traumatic tragedy averted (or reversed) that has preceded it. The savior here does die, and in so doing saves the princess (50-51). Even if the prince is a hero at this stage, nonetheless MacDonald forces our attention towards the depth and weight of his sacrifice as we have to stand and watch and listen (unless we stop up our ears) and hear his final breaths as "it is finished" (John 19.30). We wait minutes not days for his resurrection, but nonetheless the pain cuts deep. And the emergent joy of the "turn" is indeed happiness glistening with tears, or, as Tolkien puts it, a "fleeting glimpse of joy" which is as "poignant as grief" (153).

As later writer Flannery O'Connor reminds us, both in her fiction and in her writing about writing, shocks in fiction can be very productive.[40] "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do," she says, "you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock" ("The Fiction Writer and His Country" 34). MacDonald does indeed make his vision apparent by shock, jolting the vision of his readers. The about-turn (from death

to life) is not one which can be counted on to return, whether in fairyland or indeed in our own world. In that sense, in that deep sense, as O'Connor notes elsewhere, fiction "is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system" ("The Nature and Aim of Fiction" 78). And that shock carries across fairyland to *our* land and *our* hearts.

Today's readers of MacDonald, or at least my students encountering him for the first time, are not those whom we can assume have the same beliefs as he, or even the same beliefs as his original audience. But this does not mean these works are necessarily closed to them. As I hope this essay has made clear, it leads to some interesting new readings of MacDonald's works, at least in part *because* my students are reading without that shared worldview. As O'Connor indicates, when a shared worldview and shared faith knowledge is not a given, writers have to move away from "normal ways" of talking to one's audience ("The Fiction Writer and His Country" 34). This includes, as MacDonald shows, subverting fairytale conventions, and imbuing fairy tales with heady moments which are charged with deathly significance, as my students found to be the case in "The Light Princess."

The different readings my students bring in response to "The Light Princess" and MacDonald's wider writings on the imagination, also shed other kinds of light, and his encouragement of readers to take their own meaning from the story ("The Fantastic Imagination" 7), allows and celebrates these different coexisting possibilities. They might even see beyond or trip into the light fantastic through the eucatastrophic shock, through the emotional about-turn, through their wonder at MacDonald's invitation to respond. "The Light Princess" offers these possibilities, but the different perspectives my students bring to the discussion table also offer us possible new avenues for exploration in MacDonald studies, and certainly new emphases,

meanings and readings, allowing us to re-see "The Light Princess" and MacDonald's

conceptions of meaning-making through their 20-24 eyes.

Endnotes

[1] This article began its life as a conference paper for "George MacDonald & the Prophetic

Imagination," a bicentenary conference held at Wheaton College (May 2024), I am thankful to

my fellow presenters on our "Light Princess" panel, Sarah Emtage and Siobhan Maloney Later,

and for the reception my paper received and the invaluable feedback I was given which has

helped hone my pedagogical practice as well as informed this essay. I am grateful too to the

many conference attendees who shared my excitement at the new views the students bring to

MacDonald studies.

[2] With apologies to William Blake for this disruption to his "Preface" to *Milton* (62).

[3] The author is currently a Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Buckingham, UK.

[4] Writers cited in this context by students included Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Philip Pullman, and

J.K. Rowling.

[5] I designed this course in 2022, and it ran with its first cohort of finalists Winter Term, 2023.

Primary works currently studied on this course are as follows: Edward A. Abbott, *Flatland*

(1884); Owen Barfield, *Night Operation* ([c. 1974-75], 2008); C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch

and the Wardrobe* (1950), "On Stories" (1947), "Light"([c. 1944-45], 2012) and "The Man Born

Blind" ([c. 1944], 1977); George MacDonald, *The Light Princess* (1864); "The Fantastic

Imagination" (1863), "The Imagination Its Function and Its Culture" (1867); J.R.R. Tolkien, *The

Hobbit* (1937), "On Fairy-Stories" (1947), "Leaf by Niggle" (1945), "Beowulf: The Monster and

the Critics" (1936), as translator, and with reference to his extended lecture notes, *Beowulf*

(2014), and, as editor with E.V. Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925); Charles

Williams, *War in Heaven* (1930).

[6] MacDonald is not the only "pre"-Inkling writer the student consider; they also engage with Old

English and Medieval texts, later re-writings of Arthurian Legends (including Alfred Lord

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, 1859-85) and Abbott's late Victorian *Flatland*.

[7] As MacDonald discusses in more detail in "The Imagination: its Function and Purposes."

[8] This echoes MacDonald's definition of a parable (through Mr. Henry) in *Adela Cathcart* as "a

picture in words, where more is meant than meets the ear" (250).

[9] Although *Phantastes* is the most well-known reference to MacDonald in Lewis's canon, apart

from the *George MacDonald Anthology* (1946) Lewis produced, *The Princess and the Goblin*

and *The Princess and Curdie* are also referenced in *That Hideous Strength* (1945) when Jane

asks for "the *Curdie* books" (*The Cosmic Trilogy* 516).

[10] Other readers report similar difficulties. Brenton Dickieson notes that while he found it "a

good story" it was not "the threshold of awe" as Lewis had suggested, while Mari Ness's

emphasis on the "struggle" of the narrator to make it through the faerie world perhaps points to

the same struggle readers experience with a text which is both "exquisitely beautiful, and

painfully slow." Thus, she concludes, *Phantastes* is "best taken in short gulps. . .allowing the

enchantment to linger, but not overstay its welcome."

[11] Texmoot is Signum University's Annual Texas Language and Literature Symposium. Texmoot

2021 was entitled "Embodiment: Do You Need Some Body to Love?" and took place February

13, 2021. The conference was held online, due to covid restrictions. For further details on Inkling

Folk Fellowship, see "About Inkling Folk Fellowship." Both readings used the performance text

by Cara Strickland, Joe Ricke, Abby Palmisano, and Blair Hedges (2016).

[12] The performance for Texmoot commenced at 6 pm (CST) but the time difference meant it started for me in the UK at 12 am (GMT).

[13] When the third lockdown was announced (January 4, 2021) I was conducting archival research at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Travel was prohibited outside of your region and, as such, I spent a large portion of the third lockdown at my parents' home in nearby Ely. They, meanwhile, were preparing to move, so boxes were an ever present presence.

[14] Beyond fearing they may also be put off MacDonald if I led with *Phantastes*, two practical reasons also determined my choice: length of text and assigning an easily accessible volume which contained MacDonald's imaginative writings *and* his writings on the imagination.

[15] Texts currently studied on Victorian Literature (first year course) are as follows: Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847); Robert Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836) and 'My Last Duchess' (1842); Lewis Carroll, *Jabberwocky* (1871) and *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876); Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Dickens et. al, *The Haunted House* (1859); Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853); Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898); Edward Lear, *The Book of Nonsense* (1846); Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market' (1862); Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (1883); and Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Texts currently studied on Children's Literature (first year course) are as follows: Malorie Blackman, *Noughts and Crosses* (2001); Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865); Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964); Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (1911); Brian Jacques, *Redwall* (1986); Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (1995); and Noel Streatfield, *Ballet Shoes* (1942).

[16] Later illustrator of Edward Lear and gothic nonsense writer and artist in his own right. See *The Listing Attic* (1954), particularly his limerick which – like "The Light Princess" – plays with

humor, tragedy and religious cleansings and images of death and resurrection as it tells how "The babe, with a cry brief and dismal, / Fell into the water baptismal." For Gorey's relevance in relation to "The Light Princess," see also Steven Heller's discussion of Gorey's characters who, Heller notes "parody the manners of that excessively moral time [in the Victorian period] – and, by extension, the absurdities of the present" (75).

[17] Pullman makes accusations of "propaganda" (Ezard) as well as voicing his objection to "the presence of Christian doctrine" (Paul Harris).

[18] With thanks to my 2024 cohort of students who kindly agreed that I could share some of their insights as part of this publication, both those named in this acknowledgement and those who remain (by choice) anonymous. I am grateful for the different directions their ideas took our discussions, and for the way they expressed and developed their arguments. The identity of each student is kept anonymous (with students' comments marked only by a number). Particular thanks to Emily Bassill, Fota Efremova, Shaun Hampson, Rena Sato, and Millie Webster, and to each student who has elected to take "The Inklings and their Influences" over the last two years – you have, as ever, made my job a pleasure and brought new meanings and matters to my attention even in texts with which I am already very familiar.

[19] For further discussion and contextualization of this see, for instance, Kerry Dearborn (164-67) and John R. de Jong (166-67).

[20] See, for instance, Lewis's labelling MacDonald a "mystic" in *Allegory of Love* (290); Richard H. Reis's argument that there was a "strong infusion of mysticism in [MacDonald's] outlook" (33); and, more recently, Jerome Klotz (39–55).

[21] For Barthes, the emphasis is even stronger here: he argues that the birth of the reader is *predicated* on the death of the author (148).

[22] This is especially interesting when considered in the light of Mrs. Cathcart who urges Adela's Uncle to disclose the "moral" of the story of "The Light Princess" (*Adela Cathcart* 98)*,* echoing the interlocutor of "The Fantastic Imagination" who fears deducing the "wrong" meaning from a text (7-10). MacDonald places the onus on the reader to determine what the story means to them, which, whether or not it was the intended meaning of the author cannot, he argues, be wholly "wrong" to the childlike "who can see through its fairy-gates" (*Adela Cathcart* 98). Similarly, in Barthes's schema, where the intent of the author has been slaughtered *with* the author, the readers provide the meaning and thus, if there is to be a moral provided, provide that also.

[23] For instance, several of their papers addressed the eucharistic imagery also used in "The Light Princess" (49).

[24] MacDonald here is responding to a reviewer in *The Athenaeum* who labeled *Phantastes* an allegory.

[25] It is significant that, as Knoepflmacher mentions in "The Light Princess" notes (343-45), "MacDonald experimented with the multiple mock-moralizing's that Perrault often used at the conclusion of his fairy tales" (345, n. 30). See also *Adela Cathcart* (98).

[26] The Aarne-Thompson index classifies different folklore tales by story plot types. It is concerned primarily with European folklore and fairytales. More recently it has been updated and further expanded by Hans-Jörg Uther (2004). It is more commonly known by its abbreviation, *AT Tale-Type Index* or, in updated form, as the *ATU Tale-Type Index*.

[27] Particularly Perrault's moral which praises those who "wait a hundred years / And all that while asleep" suggesting that "very often Hymen's Blisses sweet . . .Are not less happy for approaching slow" (61).

[28] The New Woman can be seen in literature, such as George Egerton's *Keynotes* (1894) and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, as well as Grand's article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question." Carroll Smith-Rosenberg characterizes the New Woman as one who "challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power" (245), thus disrupting patriarchal systems of power.

[29] Perrault's princess will not be revived by "water. . .thrown on the princess's face" or the "Hungary water" used to "bathe her temples" (331). MacDonald's princess, by contrast, languishes with the absence of the water ("The Light Princess" 39) and "her life [seems to be] bound up" with the fate of the lake (40).

[30] The "princess" (Donoghue 169) in "The Tale of the Needle" does not learn to walk, because her over-protective parents try to ensure their precious long-awaited child does not come to any harm. Thus "for many years" she "was carried everywhere. . .by the most sure-footed of the servants" (160).

[31] While McGillis primarily uses "queer" here to mean strange or "other," Jarrar explores a reading of "The Light Princess" more directly in dialogue with contemporary queer and gender studies. Queer readings of "The Light Princess," such as Jarrar's, place particular emphasis on gender identity, gendered representation, bodily boundaries in the story, and the way visible differences from the norm lead to gendered otherings or otherings which assume heteronormativity.

[32] See for instance Zipes's edition of *Brothers Grimm*, particularly his discussion of the Brothers Grimm and their didactic and "improving" vision of their fairy tales (xxx). See also Lieberman (385).

[33] For once such example see Leland Spencer's reading of Anderson's "The Little Mermaid."

[34] MacDonald also plays with the gender dynamics of "The Little Mermaid" in "The Light Princess" (39).

[35] This is how Carter characterizes the twentieth century short story, as opposed to the "highly structured artefacts" of nineteenth century tales ("Walter de la Mare: *Memoirs of a Midget*" 54).

[36] The most frequent references drawn on were John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) *and Paradise Regained* (1671), the Old English "The Dream of the Rood," the Medieval *York Corpus Christi Plays*, and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c.1592-93).

[37] Their felt experiences to some extent reflect Gabelman's discussion of the "haunting levity" of MacDonald's fairy tales (*Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity* 207).

[38] However, I did not tell them this until they had first offered their raw responses, so as not to influence their readings.

[39] See MacDonald's discussion of Shakespeare ("The Imagination Its Function and Its Culture" 4).

[40] Although O'Connor does not write fairy tales, nonetheless her comments can neatly be carried across to this conversation.

Works Cited

Aarne, Antti. *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*. trans. by Stith Thompson. Folklore Fellows Communications FFC no. 184. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961.

"About Inkling Folk Fellowship." *Inkling Folk Fellowship*, 2022. https://www.inklingfolk.org/.

Anderson, Hans Christien. "The Little Mermaid" [Den lille Havfrue] in *Fairy Tales Told for Children*. ventyr, fortalte for Børn. Første Samling. Tredie Hefte, 1837.

Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies.* University of

Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath. Farrar,

Straus and Giroux, 1977, pp. 142-47.

Blake, William. *Milton*. ed. by Kay Pankhurst Easson and Roger R. Easson. Thames and

Hudson, 1979.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Lothrop Publishing Company, 1898.

Carter, Angela. "The Better to Eat You With." *New Society*, 1976, repr. *Shaking a Leg: Collected

Writings*. ed. by Jenny Uglow. Penguin, 1998, pp. 451-55.

—. *The Bloody Chamber*. Vintage, 2006.

—. *Book of Fairy Tales.* Virago, 2005.

—. "Walter de la Mare: *Memoirs of a Midget.*" *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings*. Vintage

2006, pp. 51-66.

Chesterton, G.K. "Introduction." Greville M. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*.

George Allen & Unwin, 1924, pp. 9-15.

Dearborn, Kerry. *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald.* Ashgate, 2006.

Dickieson, Brenton. "Be Careful What You Read." *A Pilgrim in Narnia*, 2013.

https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/03/04/be-careful-what-you-read-c-s-lewis-literary-

encounter-with-george-macdonald/.

Donoghue, Emma. *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins.* Hamish Hamilton, 1997.

Ezard, John. "Narnia books attacked as racist and sexist." *The Guardian,* 3 June 2002.

Gabelman, Daniel. *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity.* Baylor

University Press, 2013.

—. "Beguiling Time in Wonderland, Neverland and Fairyland." *North Wind*. vol. 41 no. 1 (2022), pp. 1-17.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." *The New England Magazine*. vol. 11 no. 5 (1892), pp. 647-56.

Gorey, Edward. *The Listing Attic*. Abelard, 1954.

Grand, Sarah. "The New Aspect of the Woman Question." *North American Review.* vol. 158 (1894), p. 271.

Grimm, Brothers [Jacob and Wilhelm]. *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales*. ed. and trans. by Jack Zipes. Princeton University Press, 2014.

Harris, Jacqueline H. "George MacDonald's Frightening Female: Menopause and Makemnoit in *The Light Princess.*" *North Wind*. vol. 33 (2014), pp. 21-34.

Harris, Paul. "Holy war looms over Disney's Narnia epic." *The Guardian*, 16 Oct 2005.

Heller, Steven. *Man Bites Man: Two Decades of Satiric Art*. A & W Publishers, 1981.

Jarrar, Osama. "Language, Ideology, and Fairy Tales: Goerge MacDonald's Fairy Tales as a Social Critique of Victorian Norms of Sexuality and Sex Roles." *North Wind.* vol. 28 (2009), pp. 33-49.

de Jong, John R. *Theology of George MacDonald*. Lutterworth, 2019.

Klotz, Jerome. "Old Forgotten Flowers: George Macdonald as Mystic Get access Arrow." *Literature and Theology*. vol. 37 no. 1 (2023), pp. 39–55.

Knoepflmacher, U.C. "Introduction." *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Penguin, 1999, pp. vii-xx.

Kreglinger, Gisela H. *Storied Revelations: Parables, Imagination and George MacDonald's Christian Fiction.* Lutterworth Press, 2014.

Lewis, C.S. *Allegory of Love.* Oxford University Press, 1936.

—. "Sometimes Fairy Tales May Say Best What's To Be Said." *On Stories*. ed. by Walter Hooper. Harcourt, 1982, pp. 45-48.

—. *Surprised by Joy.* Fount, 1977.

—. *The Cosmic Trilogy: Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra and That Hideous Strength*. Pan, 1989.

—. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* HarperCollins, 2010.

Lieberman, Marcia R. "Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale." *College English*. vol. 34 (1972), pp. 383-395.

MacDonald, George. *Adela Cathcart*. David McKay, 1911.

—. *A Dish of Orts.* Johannesen, 1996.

—. "The Fantastic Imagination." *The Complete Fairy Tales*. ed. by U.C. Knoepflmacher. Penguin, 1999, pp. 5-10.

—. "The Imagination Its Function and its Culture." *The Imagination And Other Essays*. D. Lothrop and Company, 1883, pp. 1-42.

—. "The Light Princess." *The Complete Fairy Tales*. ed. by U.C. Knoepflmacher. Penguin, 1999, pp. 15-53.

MacDonald, Grenville. *George MacDonald and His Wife*. George Allen and Unwin, 1924.

MacLachlan, Christopher, John Patrick Pazdiora and Ginger Stelle, eds. "Introduction." *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries.* Scottish Literature International, 2013, pp. v-x.

Marshall, Elizabeth. "Stripping for the Wolf: Rethinking Representations of Gender in Children's Literature." *Reading Research Quarterly*. vol. 39 no. 3 (2004), pp. 256-70.

McGillis, Roderick. "'A Fairytale Is Just a Fairytale': George MacDonald and the Queering of

Fairy." *Marvels & Tales*. vol. 17 (2003), pp. 86-99.

Ness, Mari. "Opening Doors to Fairyland: George MacDonald's *Phantastes*." *Reactor*. 2011.

https://reactormag.com/opening-doors-to-fairyland-george-macdonalds-phantastes/.

O'Connor, Flannery. "The Fiction Writer and His Country." *Mystery and Manners.* ed. by Robert

and Sally Fitzgerald. Faber & Faber, 1972; 2014, pp. 25-35.

—. "The Nature and Aim of Fiction." *Mystery and Manners*. ed. by Robert and Sally Fitzgerald.

Faber & Faber, 1972; 2014, pp. 63-86.

Pazdziora, John Patrick. "How the Fairies were not Invited to Court." *Rethinking George

MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries.* Scottish Literature International, 2013, pp. 254-

72.

Perrault, Charles. "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood." *Histories or Tales of Past Times Written for

Children Told By Mother Goose with Morals*. ed. by J. Saxon Childers. The Nonesuch Press,

1925, pp. 41-61.

Price, Danielle E. "'This Effect Defective Comes by Cause': Disability and George MacDonald's

The Light Princess." *The Lion and the Unicorn*. vol. 43 no. 1 (2019), pp. 1-21.

Reis, Richard H. *George MacDonald.* Twayne Publishers, 1972.

Simpson, Helen, "Introduction." *The Bloody Chamber*. Vintage, 2006, pp. vii-xix.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. Oxford

University Press, 1985.

Spencer, Leland. "Performing transgender identity in The Little Mermaid: from Andersen to

Disney." *Communication Studies.* vol. 65 no. 1 (2014), pp. 112–27.

Strachey, Edward. "Nonsense as a Fine Art." *Quarterly Review* vol. 167 (1888), pp. 335–65.

Strickland, Cara, Joe Ricke, Abby Palmisano, and Blair Hedges. "The Performance Text of 'The Light Princess' with *Adela Cathcart* Frame." *Inklings Forever: A Collection of Essays Presented at the Tenth Frances Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis and Friends,* vol. 10, no. 1 (2016). https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol10/iss1/83.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories." repr. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. ed. by Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins, 1997, pp. 109-61.

Troy, Maria Holmgren. "Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century Fairy Tales by Hans Christian Andersen and Richard Henry Stoddard." *Nordic Journal of English Studies*. vol. 19 no. 4 (2020), pp. 61-84.

Uther, Hans-Jörg. *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004.

Wieckowska, Katarzyna. "Introduction." *The Gothic: Studies in History, Identity and Space*. ed. by Wieckowska. Interdisciplinary Press, 2012, pp. vii-xii.

Zipes, Jack. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. University of Kentucky Press, 2002.

—. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2006.

Dr. Sarah Waters is a Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Buckingham. She came to George MacDonald later in life (no thanks to C.S. Lewis) but is glad she did finally come around to him, especially his fairy tales. She now teaches MacDonald regularly as part of a course on the Inklings and their Influences and enjoys sharing "The Light Princess" with final year students each year. When not teaching, her primary research concerns C.S. Lewis and Shakespeare.